



Graphic Art by Edward Delos Santos Cabagnet

Whitewash is not simply about the display of works that exhibit the absence of color or, conversely, the reflective plenitude thereof; it is also about the evocation of notions that are imbedded in this condition: erasure, emptiness, blankness, nullity, destruction, phosphorescence, effluence, effulgence, resplendence.

- Ramon E.S. Lerma
Curator, Ateneo Art Gallery

Our
baroquism is
better seen as
an attitude, a
sensibility,
a frame
which we
work from:
Thus,
absence, as in
nakedness,
the lack of
clothing, can
be perceived
as having in it
a quality of
the baroque.
Behind the
apparent
absence is
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Quiet Excess

JOSELINA CRUZ

Cornucopia baroque...describe(s) the helter-skelterishness of much of Philippine art and artifice...More specifically, Philippine cornucopia-baroque is a compound-complex phenomenon, the result of paradoxical or mismat(ch)ed motives...¹

The essay begins with the contemplation of Philippine baroque because the exhibition is as much about presence as absence. It is as much about our affinity with white as it is about our complex relationship with baroque. Meditations on white as color have been extensive. *Whitewash* is not an uncomplicated reprise of color. It is rather the point of departure for the conception of the show, in much the same way as the Ateneo Art Gallery collection is the point of departure for the exhibition. *Whitewash* is the beginning of a conversation.

The quote referring to 'cornucopia-baroque' comes from an essay written in 1959 which expresses, with much regret, the advanced state of baroque found in the country. The essay is instructive as it describes in detail the many aspects of local design and sensibility of the late 50s. But for its tone, the observations made in the essay could actually read like a postmodern account written at the height of modernism, inevitably crossing decades to the present. It could even read like a localized description of Los Angeles in the year 2019, the setting for *Blade Runner*, years before Ridley Scott even thought of it. In ways, the essay is somewhat predictive, not of Philippine design, but of future states. As we know, Manila did not turn back from the 'familiar eyesores...the unbroken chain of little *tiendas*, offices, drugstores, beauty shops, service stations, eateries, furniture shops, magazine stands, repair shops, boarding houses, etc., that huddle cheek by jowl everywhere.'² Instead, these have multiplied, not only locally, but in and through an unruly defiance of space such as is now occurring across countries and their burgeoning cities.

The baroque sensibility, the 'unruly complexities of its nature and its vegetation, the many colors that surround us, the telluric

¹ Torres, Emmanuel, "Philippine Design," *Progress*, 1959, p. 115.

² *Ibid.*, p. 117.

pulse of the phenomena that we still feel'³, 'sumptuousness which can easily be mistaken for pomposity, the floridness that is confounded with effeminacy, the desire for awesome effect that is frequently equated with bad taste'⁴ is a matter found problematic not only by us. The problem of baroque, if it is a problem, is one recognized by most countries, if not all, with a history of colonization. Elizabeth Armstrong writes in her introduction to the catalogue, *Ultrabaroque: Aspects of Post-Latin American Art*, that the 'term *baroque* was...evoked as a common stereotype and for many, [countries in Latin America] a derogatory cliché'.⁵ The strong modernist influence that sought to straighten curves, calm down colors, refuse figures, engage material and indulge theory, found the baroque tendencies insufficient and 'not modern',⁶ saw in such colorful exuberance an anti-thesis to the emerging cerebral aspect in art and design.

Except for a few local essays⁷ that reckon with the baroque sensibility from a more positive vantage point, opinion went against the Filipino's apparently superfluous nature, as this was in opposition to modernist perspectives.⁸ Similar to Latin America, the suggestion of our baroque-ness came during the 50s, a period strongly marked by identity and cultural politics, and consequently, by questions of nationhood.

³ Alejo Carpentier, "The Baroque and the Marvelous Real" (1975), in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, and Community*, ed. Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Farris (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1995) quoted in *Ultrabaroque: Aspects of Post-Latin American Art*, Elizabeth Armstrong and Victor Zamudio-Taylor (Museum Of Contemporary Art, San Diego, 2000), p. 177.

⁴ Rodrigo Perez III, "Baroque: The Filipino Obsession," *Sunday Times*, July 20, 1958, pp. 42-45.

⁵ Elizabeth Armstrong, "Impure Beauty," in *Ultrabaroque: Aspects of Post-Latin American Art*, p. 2.

⁶ Paulo Herkenhoff cites Clement Greenberg's critique in 1944 of Brazilian sculptor Maria Martins (1900 to 1975): her "impulse is baroque, not modern, and is given to Latin colonial décor and tropical luxuriance." Quoted in "Brazil: The Paradoxes of an Alternate Baroque," in *Ultrabaroque: Aspects of Post-Latin American Art*, p. 130.

⁷ Cf., 'Baroque: The Filipino Obsession' and Antonio G. Manuud, 'A Protest against Colored Views and "The Line" in Philippine Art' (*Solidarity*, v3, n6, June 1968, pp. 30-46).

⁸ Alfredo Roces remarks in an essay, "Filipino Folk Art," *Sunday Times Magazine*, July 2, 1961 (quoted in *Philippine Modern Art and its Critics*, ed by Alice Coseteng, Manila: Unesco National Commission of the Philippines, 1972, pp. 149-155) that 'relating Philippine folk art to our contemporary art is, for the present, an impossible task.'

The 'baroque attitude,' (borne out by our exuberant use of color⁹ as well as by our giddy use of space¹⁰—our *horror vacui*), would become a debated aspect of this identity.

The term baroque is a corruption of the Portuguese word *barocco*, which means a large, imperfect pearl. I have been hesitant to describe the word baroque as past writings have dedicated pages to it in an effort to capture its essence. Perhaps Octavio Paz gives its paradoxical and effluvial nature the necessary latitude when he writes:

'Baroque is a word whose origins and meaning is incessantly and eternally debated. Its semantic and etymological imprecision—what does it really mean and where does it come from?—lends itself perfectly to defining a style by which it is known. A definition in the process of being defined, a name that is a mask, an adjective that as it nears classification, eludes it. The Baroque is solid and complete; at the same time it is fluid and fleeting.'¹¹

In a similar vein Rodrigo Perez III writes,

'It has come to imply riches, profusion of ornament, incongruity between ornament and structure, delightful grotesquerie, theatricality, exuberance, extravagance, luxury, decadence and passion. Opulence, ostentation and obtuseness is quite apt to some extent.'¹²

⁹ 'Color is undoubtedly a strong feature of popular art. Loud and clashing colors in their purest form are a preference of popular art. (p152) further: 'By and large, color is a Filipino characteristic and popular art embodies this love for color.' Ibid., p. 153.

¹⁰ Rodrigo Perez III writes: 'He [the Filipino] conceives of space as something to be filled, of art as an excuse for ornament...he adopts, combines, or overhauls such wayward influences as Moorish, Spanish, Greco-Roman, Brazilian, Frank Lloyd Wright, Le Corbusier, Japanese, Exposition, Malayan, or Metro-Goldwyn-Meyer; his persuasions are enduringly Baroque. The style may not always be Baroque, but the attitude definitely is.' "Baroque: The Filipino Obsession," pp. 42-45.

¹¹ Octavio Paz, "The Will for Form," in *Mexico: Splendours of Thirty Centuries* (New York Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1990), p. 24, quoted in *Ultrabaroque: Aspects of Post-Latin American Art*, p. 176.

¹² "Baroque: The Filipino Obsession," p. 43.

These accounts of the baroque are but brief allusions to its complexity, enabling its negotiation across cultures and generations.¹³

The montage of permutations and the merging of elements that have accrued upon the term go beyond the visual; as Paz argues, the baroque indicates boundless possibilities, including the parody of its very self. In 1958, Yves Klein performed an elaborate ritual of purification, meditation and 'visualization exercises mastered through years of Rosicrucian practice'¹⁴ for one of his exhibitions, 'Le Vide' or The Void. Klein transformed the gallery of Iris Clert in Paris into a space for the 'immaterialization of Blue,' which was achieved by painting everything (except the ceiling and the gallery's new gray carpet) white. While the result may have been an ensuing emptiness, the void, was nonetheless, accompanied by a great public spectacle. To serve as an accompaniment to the ritual, Klein arranged for the illumination of the obelisk at the Place de la Concorde into a bluish tinge, and for two members of the republican Guard in full uniform to hold court outside the door of the gallery. Blue stamps and blue engraved script were part of the invitation to the event and a special blue cocktail was offered guests before entering Klein's white creation of 'an individual, autonomous, stabilized pictorial climate.'¹⁵ Never mind that he was actually painting another monochrome, but as Perez writes perceptively, "the style may not always be Baroque, but the attitude definitely is."

Spanish philosopher Eugenio d'Ors also defines the baroque beyond the mere conglomeration of possibilities: 'They all form, without knowing, a rich repertoire of baroque chaos... All in all, it is possible for baroquism to be present in nakedness itself. For more than one contemporary nudist, the absence of dress holds an intimate meaning that is more artificial, more emphatic, more "office-like" than the one the curly wig may have held...'¹⁶ Our baroquism is better seen as an

¹³ Victor Zamudio-Tyaloer writes: 'Baroque visual and intellectual culture not only connected such cities as Havana and Madrid but also linked Manila with the Mexican ports of Acapulco and Veracruz, and Rio de Janeiro and Salvador de Bahia with Macao, in the Far East, and Goa, on the Indian Subcontinent.' "Ultrabaroque: Art, Mestizaje, Globalization," in *Ultrabaroque: Aspects of Post-Latin American Art*, p. 176.

¹⁴ Altshuler, Bruce, *The Avant-Garde in Exhibition: New Art in the 20th Century* (California: University of California Press, 1992), p. 192.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 195.

¹⁶ d'Ors, Eugenio, *Lo barroco* (Madrid: Tecnos, 1993), pp. 89, 90-91, 96-97, trans. from the Spanish by Jamie Feliu. Quoted in *Ultrabaroque: Aspects of Post-Latin American Art*, p. 176.

attitude, a sensibility, a frame from which we work from. Thus absence, as in nakedness, the lack of clothing, can be viewed as possessing a quality of the baroque. Behind the apparent absence is the tone of artificiality, of being off-kilter despite the lack. It is definitely this lack, which proceeds to engage the quality of the baroque.

These two suggestions, the almost-baroque spectacle that accompanied the creation of a white space, and that of the baroque character of absence, lack, nakedness, helps articulate the extraordinary association between that of excess and apparent emptiness. Between these two extremes lies latent a graver reading of works done by Filipinos. The consideration of white and its many connotations of purity, negativity, emptiness and absence, could (and can easily) exist with the understanding of these concepts as baroque, full, complex, abundant, if not colorful. As Melville writes in his roaring (like the sea), lofty literary style: "But not yet have we solved the incantation of this whiteness, and learned why it appeals with such power to the soul; more strange and more portentous..."¹⁷

The Ateneo Art Gallery's collection is comprised of some of the earliest works done by artists looking at new modes of painting and of art expression. 'A new school,' writes Alfredo Roces in 1964, 'seems to be emerging, one distinct from the older Filipino painting tradition in the sense that colors and elaborate forms, aside from representational ideas, are abandoned for austere non-objective abstracts.'¹⁸ Artists such as Fernando Zobel, Lee Aguinaldo, J. Elizalde Navarro, Ang Kiukok, and Arturo Luz became figures of this 'new school' of the 1960s. The concern then was to engage the emerging internationalism found in art, architecture and design, one that turned towards subdued tones and quiet, controlled expression. Colors became muted, designs lost their efflorescence and exuberance, and art thought of itself only as 'expressionist, as to go beyond would be to border on the 'baroque.'

Thus, the relationship between baroque in the Philippines and the encroaching internationalism was fraught. Local artists, writers, and critics sought a visual vocabulary that could take part in international conversations, or at least be seen as having an understanding of it. There were a few who saw possibilities in Philippine baroque expression.

¹⁷ Herman Melville, *Moby Dick, or The Whale*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1956), p. 163.

¹⁸ Roces Alfredo, "Philippine Art Today," *Fookien Times Yearbook*, 1964, p. 260.

Fernando Zobel, for example, stopped using color for some years, painting only in black and white.¹⁹ By 1962, Arturo Luz, once known as a colorist, had toned down his color (or even excluded these totally) his works becoming more linear and more decisively invested in black and white.²⁰ Lee Aguinaldo would lose one or the other in turn, at times losing movement in favor of color, or leaving behind color for gesture. Roberto Chabet's work in 1964 was pointedly an 'austere black and white affair. Quietness, immobility and austere design... muted tones of black and charcoal grey with white.'²¹ These departures from overt abundance, forms, and colors carried the influence of international dialogue and debate. Despite that, Zobel's whitescapes drew from the Spanish saetas, arrows shot through the air, and Luz's linear drawings of growing cities and carnival forms articulated the chaotic state of such sites. There may have been an awareness of white's latent complexity, even its baroque-ness, among local artists, something perhaps they were unwilling to confront. At least not yet. As Melville's Ahab reflects: "is it, that as in essence whiteness is not so much a color as the visible absence of color, and at the same time the concrete of all colors; is it for these reasons that there is such a dumb blankness, full of meaning, in a wide landscape of snows—a colorless, all-color atheism from which we shrink?"²²

Edgar Talusan Fernandez's work *Kinupot*, (1977) definitely undermines the use of white as mere absence, *that dumb blankness, full of meaning*. Underneath the white cover one discerns figures seeking escape. The absurdity of the situation dawns as one realizes that we will never see the figures enshrouded by the white cloth even as they struggle to break out from their deathly cocoon. The work projects a future action, and at the same time, a numbing immobility.

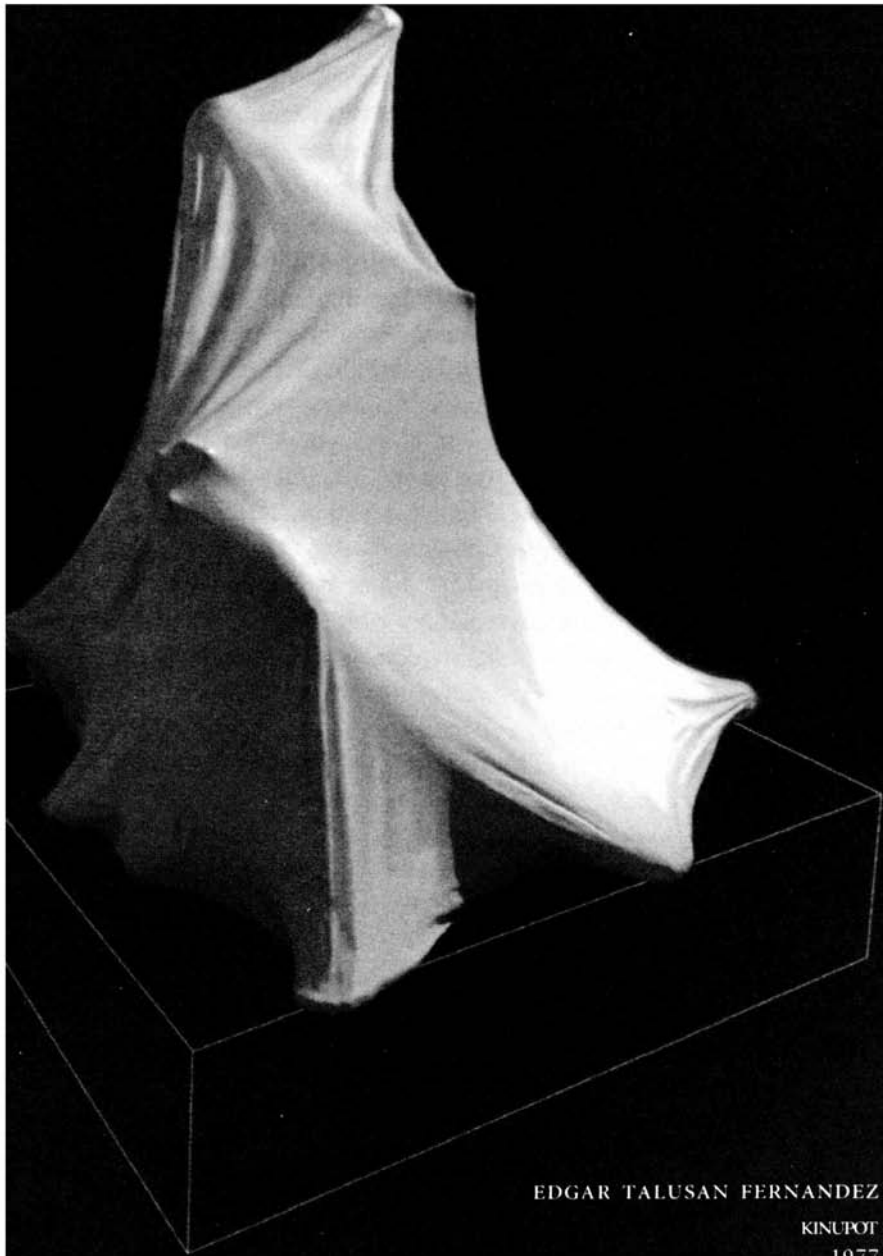
The 1970s and the early 1980s would coalesce concerns about the possibility and idea of nationhood (and, consequently, identity, which

¹⁹ Armando D. Manalo, "Fernando Zobel: A Virtuoso of Paint, inset The Man on his Art," *PACE Newsmagazine*, March 24, 1972, p. 24.

²⁰ Leonides Benesa, 'The Drawings of Arturo Luz', *Philippine Modern Art and its Critics*, ed by Alice Coseteng, (Manila: Unesco National Commission of the Philippines, 1972), p. 33.

²¹ Alfredo Roces, "New Trend in Painting," *Philippine Modern Art and its Critics*, p. 47.

²² Moby Dick, p. 163.



EDGAR TALUSAN FERNANDEZ

KINUPOT

1977

119 x 116 cm

Molded canvas over wood armature

Gift of the artist

began earlier) when these cultural politics became a tool used by the government to keep its hold over the people and the country. Mass actions held during this time involved artists whose concern was to use art as protest. As part of the throng who moved, they would execute murals with lightning speed before the police could come to haul them away. Fernandez remembers²³ with much amusement, that the murals they painted then would be gone the next day. Each one would be whitewashed. And so it went: for every political mural painted, the process of whitewashing took place. Expressions of protest would be erased under the cover of white paint. Much of the First Lady's, Imelda Marcos', efforts at the beautification of Manila took the form of covering up scenes considered unsightly. Squatter areas were walled around with trees or galvanized sheeting. At the Film Center, an accident that resulted in the entombment of scores of construction workers in quick drying cement, was poured over with the grayness of the material.

Such erasures removed an action. But whitewashing, rather than withholding sentiment, fanned it further. The whitened spaces, which held under it unadulterated action, sentiment and passion, could in the future, hold more of it, for 'white enables other things to become visible.'²⁴ White is never simply white especially on those sites where cultural, political and religious confrontations and upheavals have taken place. In the same way that absence always hints at the trace of erasure.

Even the insistence on emptiness on the part of some artists such as Lani Maestro, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Doris Salcedo, or Valeska Soares belies an underlying reference to aspects of baroque.²⁵ Valeska Soares' work, *Sinners* (1995), for example, is a quiet installation consisting of white benches whereupon slabs of beeswax rest; like kneelers, the beeswax retains the imprint of the person who once knelt there.²⁶ Despite the minimal installation, the work resonates with the weight of religious ceremony and guilt. Lani Maestro's work similarly follows along the lines of minimalism. *Quiet Pain* (1984) fills a 50 x 20 feet wall with almost imperceptible nails and bits of paper with written words. Stephen

²³ Talk at the Lopez Memorial Museum, August 4, 2001.

²⁴ Robert Ryman, quoted in *American Art in the 20th Century*, biography by Isabelle Dervaux (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 1993), p. 469.

²⁵ Some of Felix Gonzalez-Torres works make reference to the baroque spectacle (for example, *Untitled (America)*, 1995).

²⁶ Cf. *Ultrabaroque: Aspects of Post-Latin American Art*, p. 87.

Horne writes that 'the experience of quantity with regard to both labour and material is overwhelming, yet their simplicity limits any tendency toward the spectacular.'²⁷

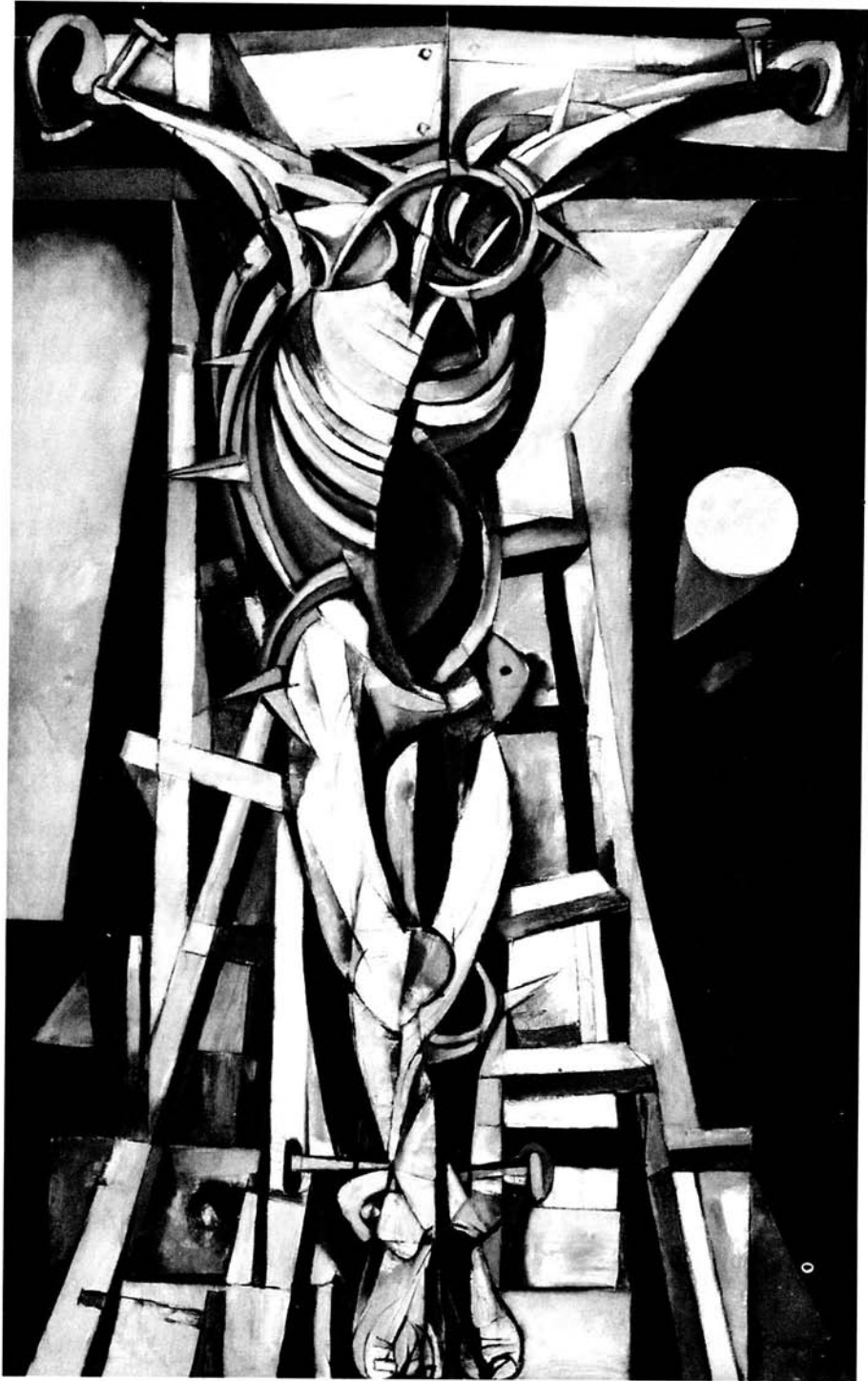
Works by younger artists such as Nona Garcia and Ronald Anading appear to draw instances of the baroque more calmly into their contemporary practice. Anading's video *Line Drawing* (1999) assumes the formalist concern regarding line and even the growing contemporary concern about drawing, but the action/performance, which he insists should be part of the work, belies another engagement. Garcia's practice similarly deploys contemporary aesthetics to pursue concerns relating to the idea of layers, with many of her works never moving away from a muted paint box. Her work, *The Gift* (2001), recalls the ritual of gift-giving as well as the intricate preparations and rite of the wedding.

Whitewash is seen as an opportunity to reactivate developments in our art history by passing through a different schema. Having calmed our fear of the baroque—of the cornucopia-baroque—current work can perhaps be rearticulated in spaces where one can move back and forth between the conceptual and modernist frames of the center and the resonance found in the peripheral local. This allows us to weave back and forth through history, the present, and if possible, the future. The presence of excess in apparent silence, or perhaps the presence of silence in apparent excess are both apparent contradictions embraced wholeheartedly by our very dissonant present. Such articulations also enable us to discuss our continuing appetite for baroque-ness, but this time seen through the sheerness of white. Writers and theorists—from Cuban writers Alejo Carpienter to José Lezama Lima to curator Elizabeth Armstrong to Rodrigo Perez III—have looked to the baroque pearl, the *barocco*, as an object rich in metaphors, many times referring to its strange and wondrous attraction and potential. The baroque pearl's formation begins when a foreign particle penetrates the mantle of the mollusk shell. As the expanding pearl lodges in the mollusk's muscle tissue, it encounters resistance, making it assume an irregular shape. Such irregularity renders it imperfect: it becomes barocco.²⁸

²⁷ Stephen Horne, *Lani Maestro: A Wolf in the Lung*, (Quebec: Le Chambre Blanche, 1994), p. 17.

²⁸ Cf. *Ultrabaroque: Aspects of Post-Latin American Art*, p. 2.

Gleaming white, and at times, unbearably big, the irregular pearl permits accumulation and continuous layering—of culture, of language, of symbols, of signs, of art. Upon its lustrous, white surface—irregular, rough, asymmetrical—are possible the many acculturations that have been dealt upon it, a dissident space: *barocco*, upon which many things are possible. ☞



ANG KIUKOK

Crucified

1977

Oil on canvas

142 x 89 cm

Gift of the artist

Of all colors,
white is the
color of
discovery
because one
proceeds
from a blank
space to a
charged zone
bristling with
notations,
markings,
scribbles,
brushstrokes
and finally to
the resonant
field of the
completed
painting that
is a
realization of
the artist's
vision.

The Meanings of White

ALICE G. GUILLERMO

White for us is the Southeast Asian or Malay word *puti/putih*, the opposite of *itim/hitam*. In every culture, white, as plain as it may seem, bears a multitude of significations. But it also gives rise to a paradox. For it connotes both fullness of spirit and hollow emptiness. It can be blank and mute such as a piece of ordinary paper, a *tabula rasa*; but it can also hold the fullness of being as when it is charged with energy, the cosmic force, the breath of life.

Mention WHITE, and its dark twin, BLACK, is in the same breath summoned into existence. White and black are binary opposites, but between these two poles unfolds a virtually inexhaustible range of tones from plain white to pitch black. These tones enter into alliance with various hues— red, orange, green, blue, indigo, and violet, thereby producing light tints in the lower tonal range to deep shades in the higher range. White also links up with light to create bright, transparent, luminous effects, although under ordinary conditions, it is neutral, matte, and opaque. Indeed, white is both science and art. As a scientific phenomenon, white reflects all colors of the spectrum in the same way that black absorbs all colors.

Indeed, there is not a single white but many whites—white, offwhite, eggshell white with a tinge of blue, the white of a baby's breath, creamy white, chalky white. In art, white gives rise to nuances, shadows, reflections, and small movements, elusive and fleeting, that all in all create a visual watchfulness and develop a sensitivity of perception on the part of the viewer.

White is richly imagistic, even as different cultures generate their own images. The Western religious imagination has given rise to resplendent angels with strong feathered wings, as well as to cherubs, the ubiquitous *putti*, that hover over the privileged scene in baroque paintings. Earlier, Hellenistic Greece gave immortal form to the Winged Victory of Samothrace in white marble, a noble female figure at the prow of a ship braced against the sea wind. Marble, indeed, is a perfect fulfillment of white, for by means of it white becomes luminous, resplendent even. Raw marble is rugged, but polished to a high sheen,

as in the time of Praxiteles, it lent a heroic aura to the Olympian figures. White also summons up billowing sails of wind-driven ships taking on the changing colors of the sky with the passing hours, clouds sailing in vast space, rows of herons preening in reflecting ponds, flocks of silvery cranes casting their gray shadows on the moon, or white flowers such as lilies and magnolias, which in the hands of a skillful artist exude a delicate virtual fragrance. Or in a quiet domestic interior, one may find the milky white porcelain of a *blanc de chine* vase or a still life of eggs in a bluish-gray celadon bowl.

Its meanings, too, are culture-bound, and as such wide-ranging, even oppositional. In many cultures, it is associated with certain human values, edifying in the moral sense, with qualifiers such as pure, immaculate, impeccable, unblemished. White is also classical reticence, an aristocratic detachment before the hue and cry of quotidian existence. But if, on one hand, white can be expansive, effulgent, and limitless like infinite space, on the other hand, it can be whittled down to the size of the four walls of a whitewashed hospital room with its antiseptic emptiness and anonymity.

We have many memorable encounters with white in art. In an *ukiyo-e* print by Hiroshige, a plump white cat perched on the window sill of a geisha's apartment, looks out upon the old Asakusa district below with Mount Fuji in the distant horizon. Picasso's *Woman in White* captures a delicate unselfconscious reverie. There is also Andrew Wyeth's monochromatic painting *Wind from the Sea*, showing an open window framed by a white lacy curtain stirred by the wind and providing a glimpse of a rustic winding pathway to the sea. The room itself is desolate and deserted, but the softly billowing curtain with its antique floral pattern intimates presences and conjures up memories. Seashells lying on the window sill introduce a lingering sense of time and tide echoing in space.

American artist Georgia O'Keeffe startles the viewer with her white magnified blossoms, camellias and magnolia flowers, at once infinitely pure and irresistibly sensuous, defying the two-dimensionality of the painting with their inward spiralling chambers and deep, half-hidden crannies, the floral forms spilling over the pictorial space into the universe at large. There, too, are the starkly white animal bones and skulls suspended against the desert sky like primeval icons. In photography, Robert Mapplethorpe also took on the subject of flowers. One of his

most memorable images is the single calla lily, astonishing in its whiteness and newness and exquisite purity of form, the organic tissue of its petals seamless and delicately inwoven with light, its structural symmetry perfect as the flower evolves out of its deep center marked by the fuzzy orange pistil and opens up and outward in a splendid movement of efflorescence.

Certainly, the painters of the Southern Sung perfected the role of white in landscape art. White was an essential part of the perspective-in-space of lofty mountains shrouded in mist in parts where the white ground of the paper itself was left untouched in a skillful interplay with the inkbrush drawing of rocks and trees. As such, the white passages enhance the perspective of the work as they suggest overlapping screens of relative distances. White, too, is the element that creates the meandering streams, the sparkling white spray, and the leaping cascades that join the swift waters at the foot of the jagged cliffs. In these landscapes, the entire gamut of tonal values ranging from the bold marks of dense ink to the faintest wash of silvery gray interacts with white passages that suggest mist and cloud. In a hotel on the edge of the West Lake in Hangchow, the capital city of the Southern Sung, a huge oval mirror on the wall opposite one's bed in a room overlooking the lake created the illusion of a moving atmospheric painting in which one could observe at exquisite leisure the modulating tones of the water from dawn to dusk, as well as take note of the small sailboats and other watercraft that plied the sparkling lake in the course of the day and at different levels in the reflected image.

Of a different style, the paintings imbued with the spirit of *ch'an* or *zen* valorized spontaneity after a period of meditation where the subject from nature, such as a bamboo plant, becomes one with the human subject, the painter with his unique consciousness. The quick dynamic brushstroke, executed with the flair and precision of an expert swordsman, charges the white space and makes it crackle with energy, initiating a vital *yang-yin* dialogue of figure and space. Negative/passive void is transformed into positive/active entity. The supreme potential of white is thus released as it comes alive, filled with *chi* or spirit. Likewise, calligraphy which stresses the dynamism of line as it interacts with the paper is highly valued because it is a visible record of the traces of an individual life force. Thus, calligraphic characters which may constitute a poem, an admonition, or a witty saying are often framed in

(details)

NONA GARCIA

The Gift

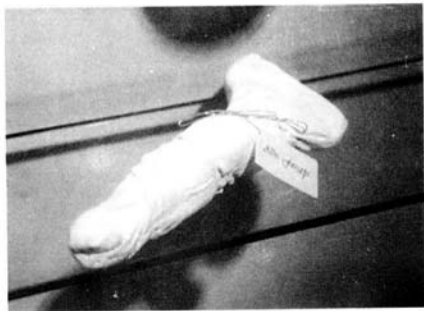
2001

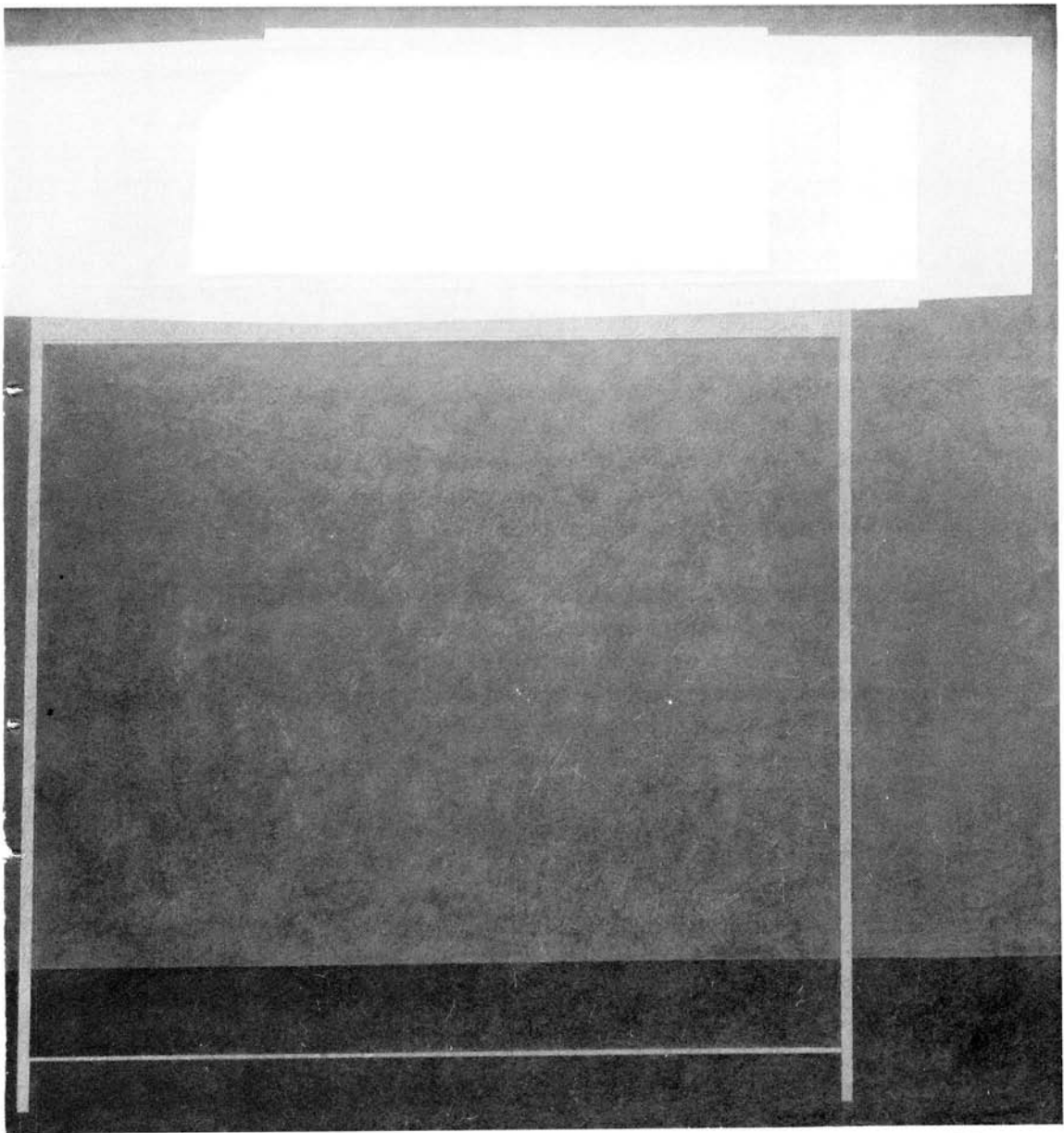
Oil on canvas,

Glass cabinet and plaster

180 x 240 cm

Collection of the artist





ROBERTO CHABET

White Table

1964

Casein on fiber board

90.5 x 101 cm

Gift of Fernando Zóbel

glass or even embossed or emblazoned in gold. Painting which foregrounds the interplay of figure and space is necessarily based on a minimalist artistic economy devoid of clutter.

Beyond the yang-yin binaries of Taoism, Zen, originally ch'an in Chinese, developed its own aesthetic philosophy in Japan. Its minimalism was related to the brevity of the *haiku* which, more importantly, captures a moment or flash of insight, *satori*. Needless to say, *satori* occurred in a setting that in its spareness was apropos to the instantaneous crystallization of an idea or concept. It involved a brilliant minimalism represented by brevity of wit and an economy of resources that had been reduced to the barest bones.

The minimalist principle in art later proved to be highly influential in many aspects of modern and contemporary cultures. As an artistic value, it must have sprung from a vivid experience of whiteness. A blank white canvas or sheet of paper is a zone of utmost sensitivity. White is not merely a neutral ground to be marked, a passive recipient and empty medium, for when one sets a mark on it, deliberately or by chance, one brings into action upon a system of significations and relationships on the pictorial space.

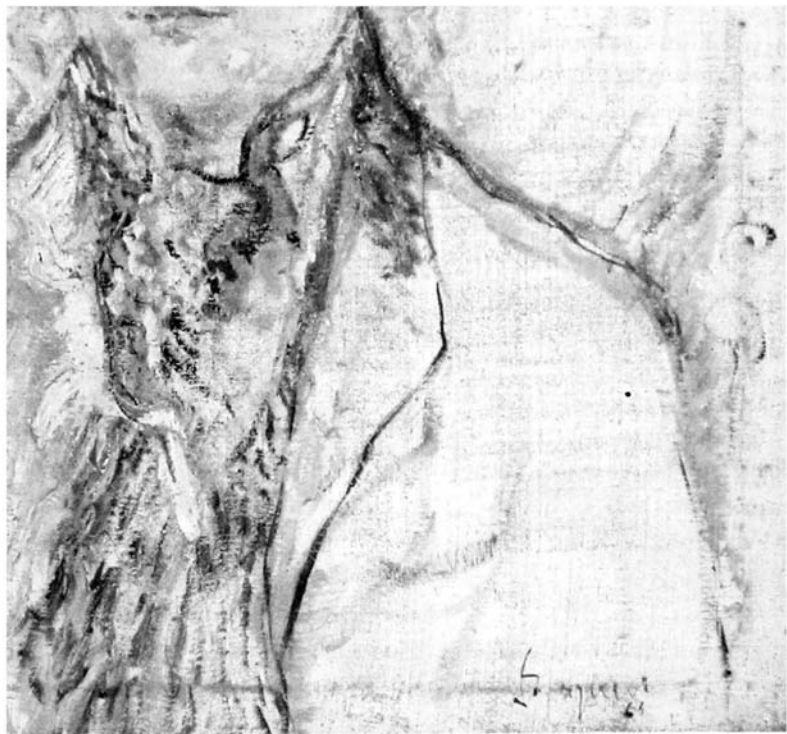
Indeed, the first gesture on a blank canvas is to place a mark on it, which can be a dot, line or brush of color. This itself becomes a signifier in its particular properties and in its relation to the entire visual field and its other contents. Whether it is centered or off-center is part of its meaning. The instrument used in making the mark is another factor: the line made by means of a piece of charcoal is soft, porous, of a rich black, while that made by means of a technical pen is fine, sharp, and precise. In the same way, the character and consistency of the pigment makes a difference, so does the quality of the surface or ground. Applied on a porous highly-receptive ground (at times unprimed), the paint may have a diffuse, spreading effect upon the white field, whereas on a hard, enamel-like ground, there may be a greater containment and precision of color application, with a hard surface luster. Likewise, the effect of gestural or kinetic painting is different from that of post-painterly abstraction techniques such as staining, dripping, splashing, and pouring on a canvas. The painter may bring to bear dramatic action on the white canvas surface, whether set on an easel or spread out on the floor. Or a painter may sensitively woo the white virgin surface by applying a soft blush of color or a nuance of tone. The original white surface may

eventually disappear under layers of oil paint or other pigment. In the end, the painting becomes a palimpsest, revealing and concealing numerous elements, figures, motifs, scribbles, graffiti, stray or random texts, collaged units, and even pentimenti through a continuous process of scumbling and layering and overpainting. But all things that lie beneath is part of the work as they build up a dense texture and constitute the archaeology or memory of the work of art.

In the second decade of the 20th century, the trend in monochrome, if not achromatic, works was ushered in by the Constructivists who valorized the new industrial materials, such as structural steel, plate glass, chrome and plexiglass, creating from these a modern aesthetic characterized by the avoidance of surface ornamentation. While on one hand, they wanted to create an artistic and architectural environment that would reflect human needs, on the other hand, they drew heavily on the new technologies to develop increasingly formal concerns. White was used extensively in architecture for building exteriors and interiors with minimal furnishing, thereby producing an utterly clean, impersonal effect. Bauhaus minimalism in architecture represented an important trend in the use of white concrete shell allied with a glass skin. Mies van der Rohe promoted a reductive art from the principle of “less is more.”

In 1918, the minimalist trend culminated in Malevich's *White on White* painting. In this work, Malevich, who had described his style as suprematist, felt that he achieved “pure painting” which, according to him, liberated art “from the useless weight of the object”. This painting, which was the first achromatic abstraction, signified for the artist “the supremacy of pure feeling and perception,” or, if you will, the experience of being launched into infinite space. Its composition consisted of a tilted white square superimposed on a white ground, the former distinguished from the latter only by a fine difference in texture. To this work, another Russian artist, Rodchenko, responded with *Black on Black*.

But the concept of white on white in painting was not entirely new although in this later time it involved conscious theory and deliberation. For in an earlier social context, the ascendance of the bourgeoisie in Holland, the 17th century Dutch painters of still life made great achievements in this direction. The fine vessels bearing fruits and all kinds of gustatory delights were set on tablecloths of white brocade which bore elaborate floral designs in white but of a slightly different



JOSE LUIS BALAGUERO

Portrait of Fernando Zóbel

1964

Oil on canvas

55 x 47 cm

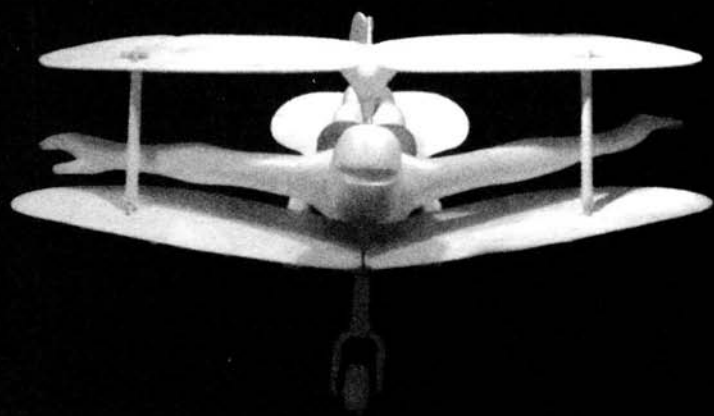
Gift of Fernando Zóbel

tone and texture. In most still lifes, the *petits maitres* skilfully captured the creamy white of the tablecloths with supple folds in delicate modulations of tone.

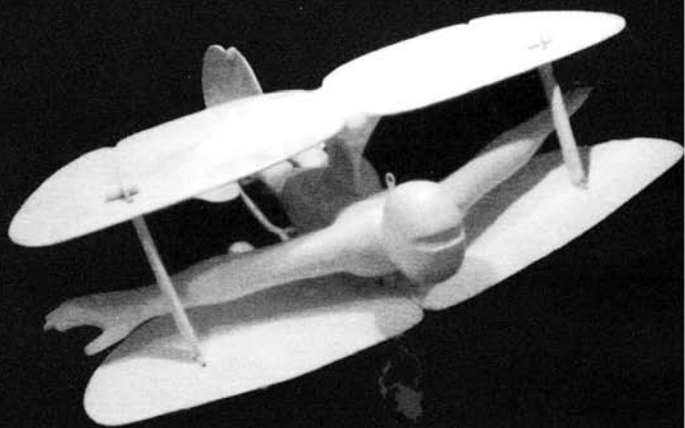
In the United States, the achromatic trend was resumed in the Fifties with a number of artists taking this direction. Sam Francis did white paintings in this period but with a different motivation touching on the moral. Rejecting all color, he did totally white paintings with hardly a visible brushstroke as a cathartic experience, an expiation of uncleanness. Robert Rauschenberg's white paintings reflected the environment, but, even more, he was particularly fascinated by the passing shadows cast by viewers onto his plain white panels. In the same way, the shadows and reflections that a three-dimensional work casts on the surroundings are themselves an integral part of the piece. White, instead of black, can be used for line drawing against a dark or black ground, as in the calligraphic paintings of Mark Tobey, still an offshoot of the gestural school.

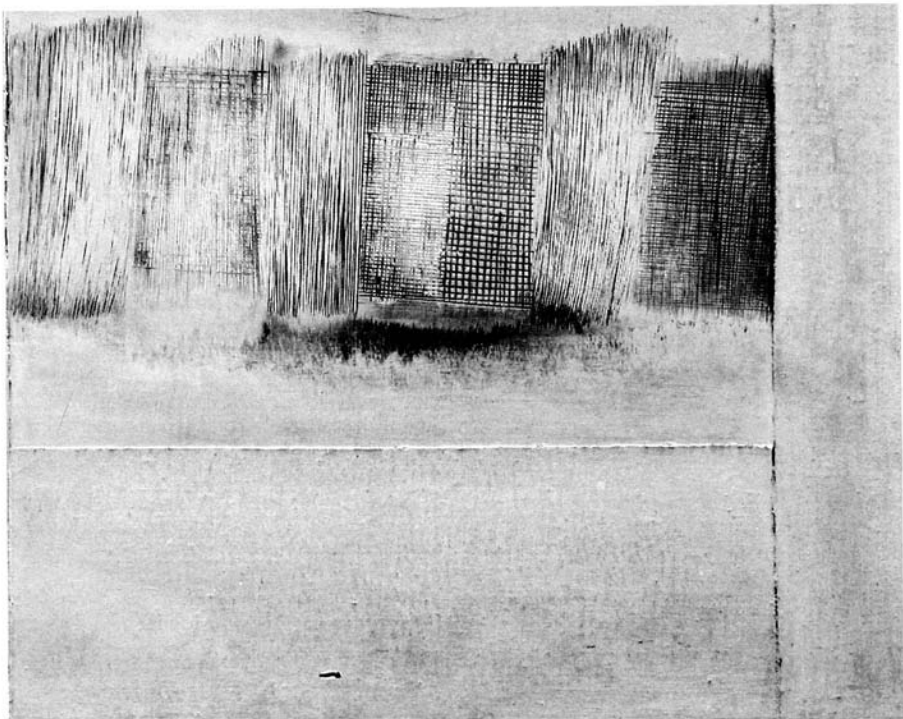
A section of contemporary art involved the use of white fabric not as two-dimensional ground for painting but as material for wrapping, enveloping, or enclosing diverse objects, as in the American artist Christo's well-known *empaquetages*. In monumental site-specific installations, Christo wrapped entire buildings such as the Reichstag in Berlin and bridges such as the Pont Neuf in Paris, as well as built mile-long environmental structures using cloth. *Running Fence*, for example, consisted of twenty-four miles of white nylon winding through Sonoma and Marin counties in California. Such a giant installation in white fabric conveyed an overwhelming experience of whiteness in terms of scale, texture, and varieties of tone as the material interacted with the surroundings, whether it was an urban landscape or a country setting. At the same time, it implicitly dealt with the theme of concealment and revelation, of inner and outer reality, while teasing one's recollection of the monumental object now enclosed and hitherto taken for granted.

Of all colors, white is the color of discovery because one proceeds from a blank space to a charged zone bristling with notations, markings, scribbles, brushstrokes and finally to the resonant field of the completed painting that is a realization of the artist's vision. And, having arrived there, one can trace one's steps backwards to the original white space from which all creatures sprang forth. ☺



J. ELIZALDE NAVARRO
A FLYING MACHINE FOR ICARUS
1984
Wood, metal, found objects
95 x 103 cm
Lopez Memorial Museum Collection





LAO LIANBEN

Zen Afternoon

1978

Oil on wood

76 x 76 cm

Purchase Fund

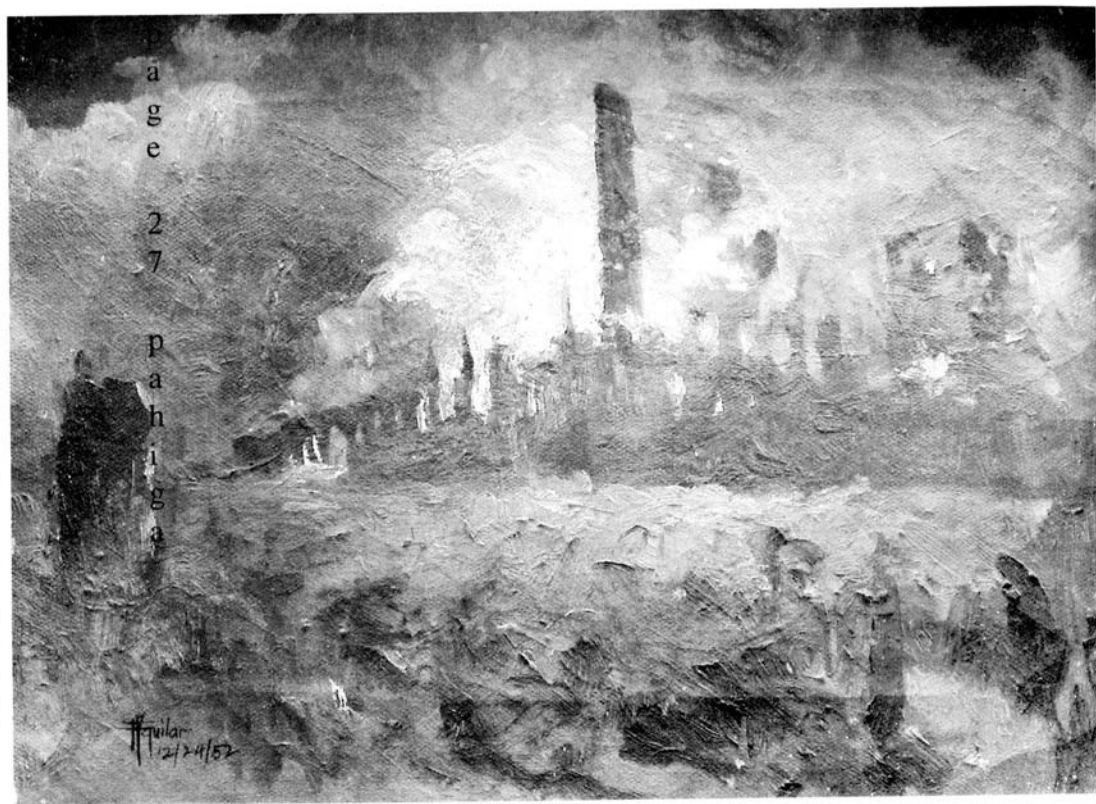
FEDERICO AGUILAR ALCUAZ
The Burning of Ateneo de Manila 1945

1952

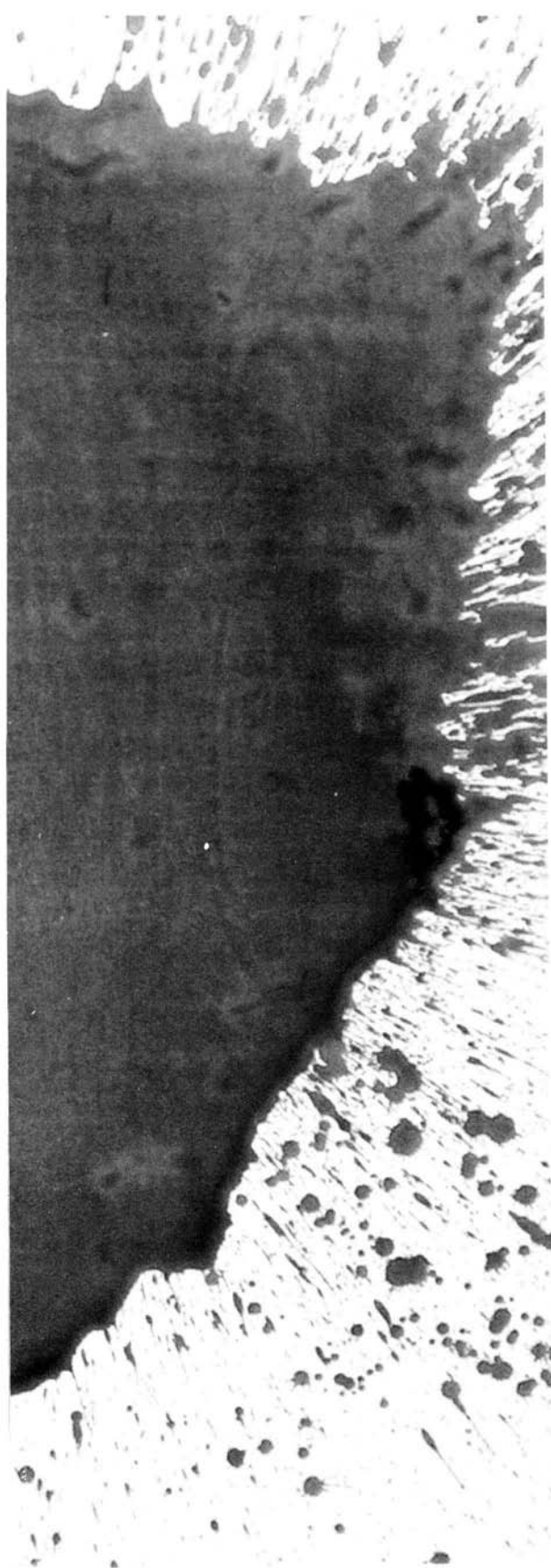
Oil on canvas

22 x 29.5 cm

Ateneo Art Gallery Collection







VICENTE BUTRON
*No. 174, a limited action
of 19:54.6.9.98
the geography of time
and the semblance of nothing*
1998
Synthetic polymer paint on wood
122 x 122 cm
Gift of the artist

PABLO BAENS SANTOS

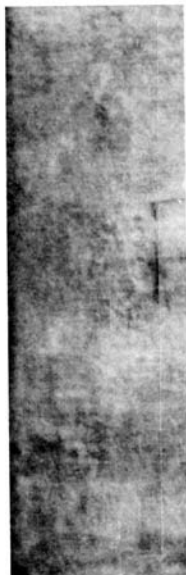
Maggagapas

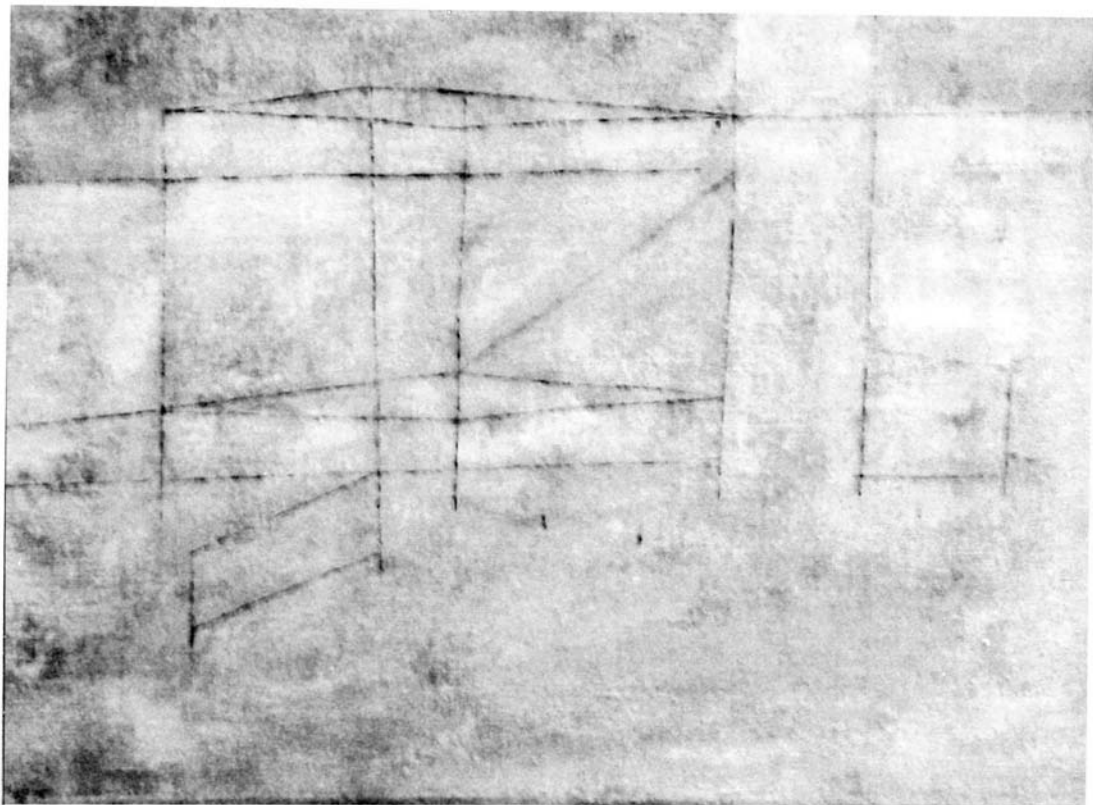
1979

Oil on canvas

53 x 78 cm

Ateneo Art Gallery Collection





ARTURO LUZ

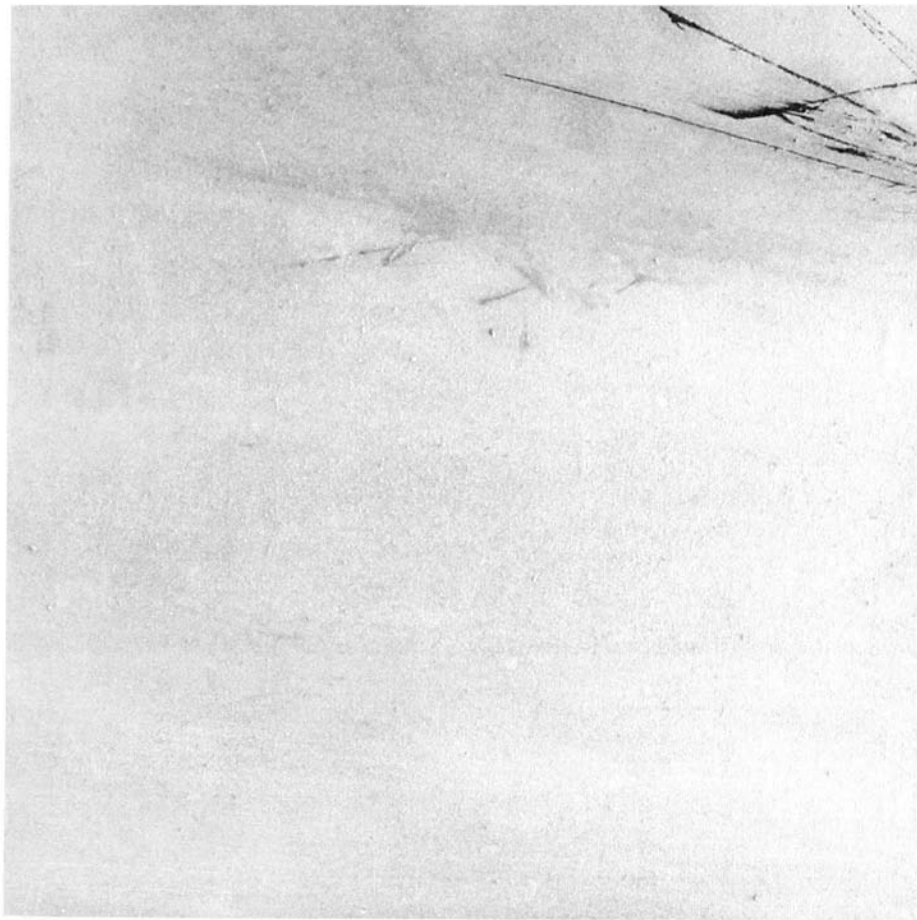
Carnival Forms II

1957

Oil on canvas

55 x 61 cm

Gift of Fernando Zóbel



FERNANDO ZÓBEL

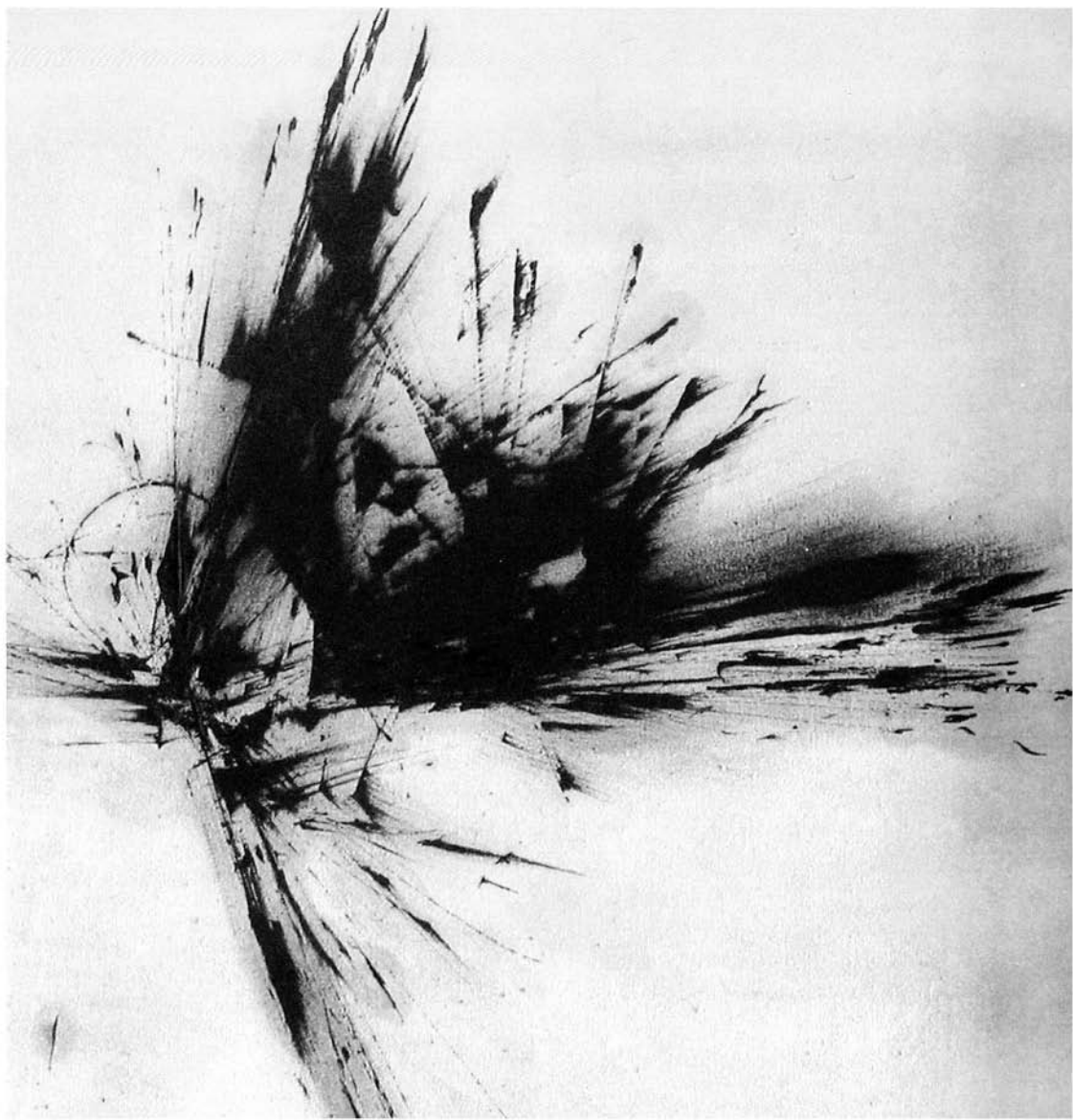
Castilla VIII

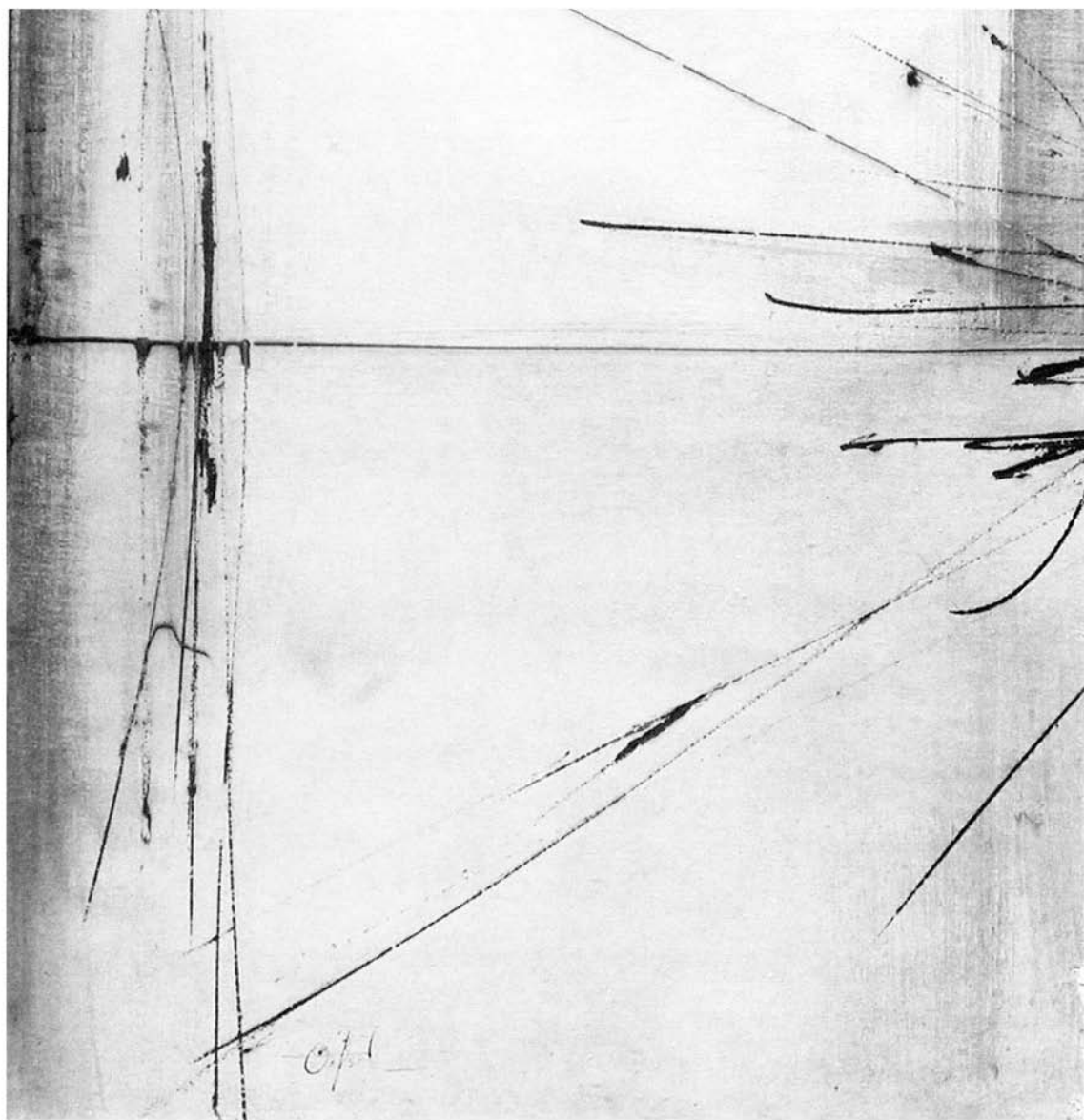
1960

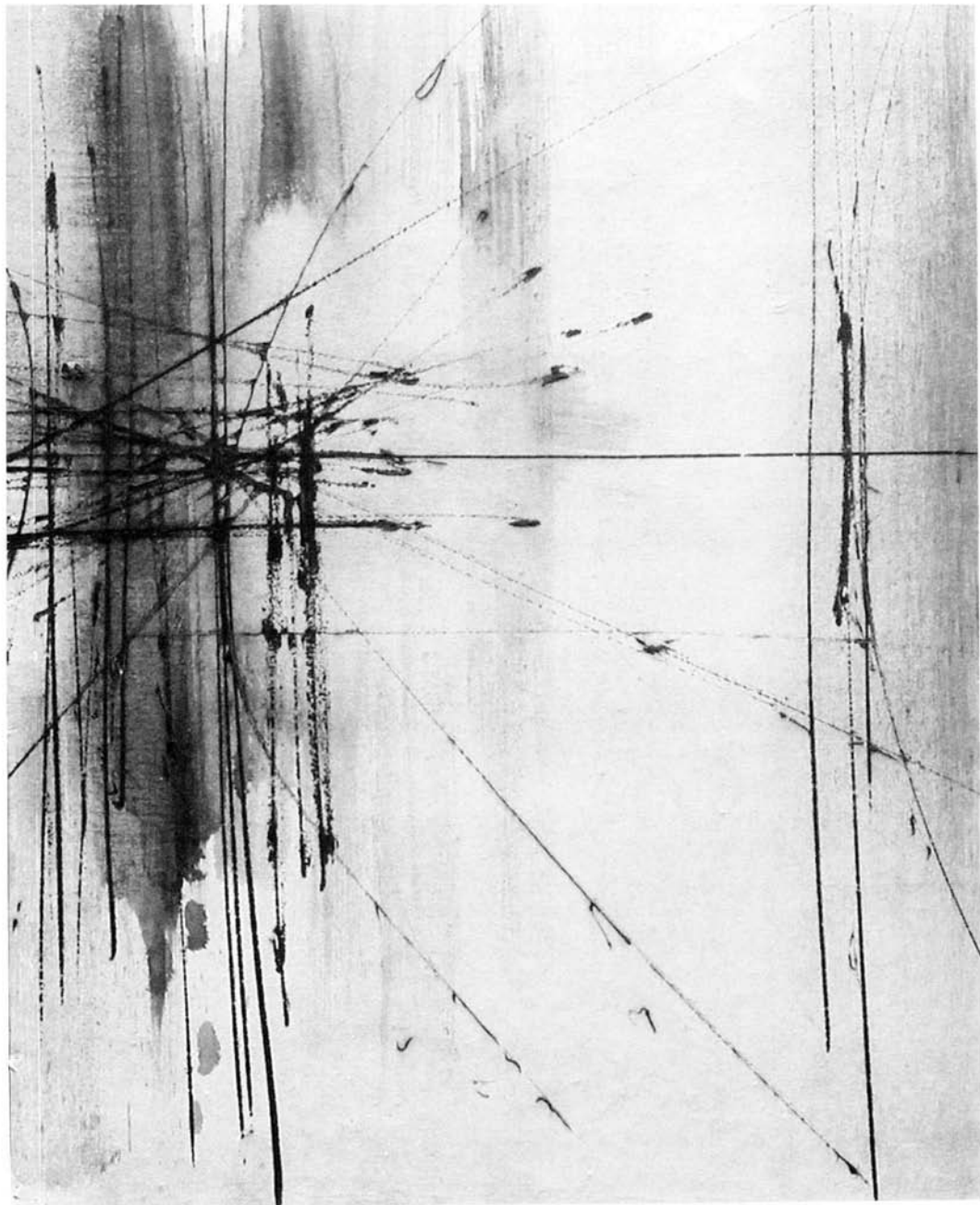
Oil on canvas

105 x 75 cm

Gift of the artist







FERNANDO ZÓBEL

Saeta No. 36

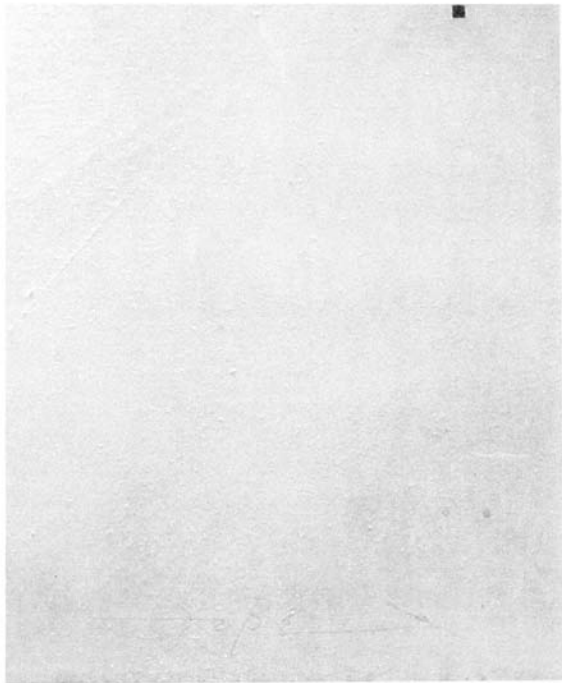
1957

Oil on canvas

61.5 x 92 cm

Gift of Roger Keyes





FERNANDO ZÓBEL

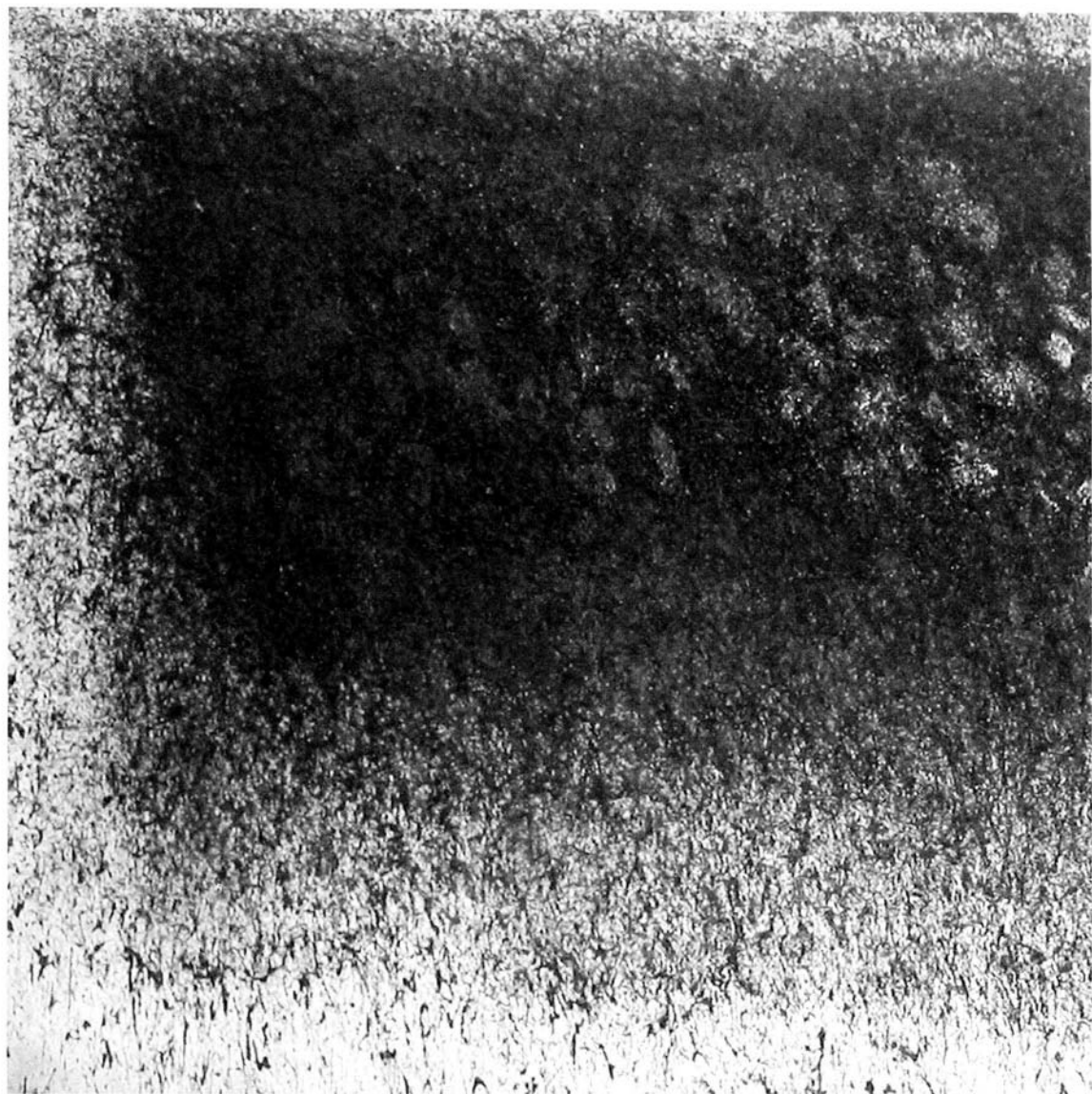
El Pasillo

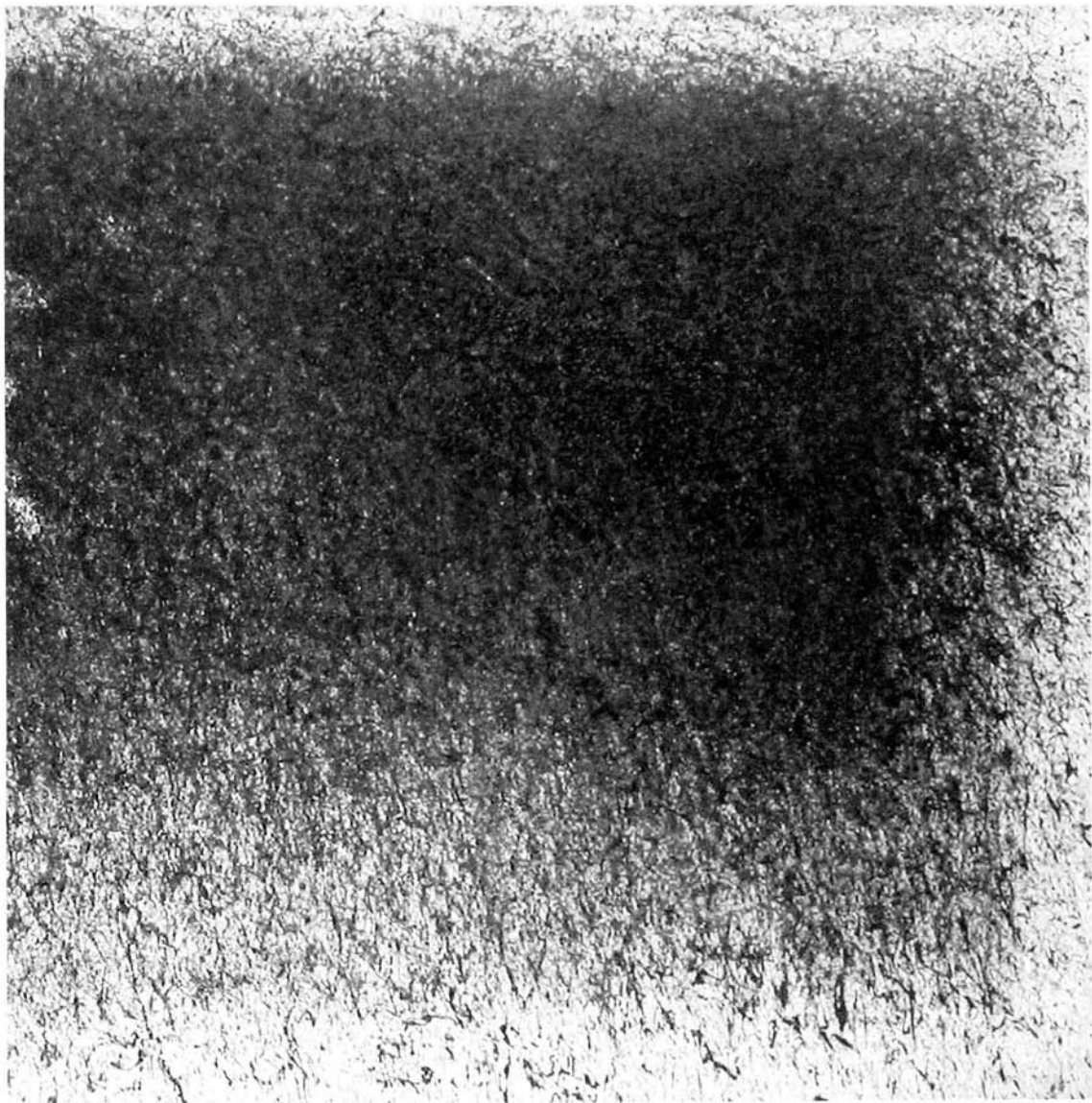
1964

Oil on canvas

74 x 101 cm

Gift of the artist

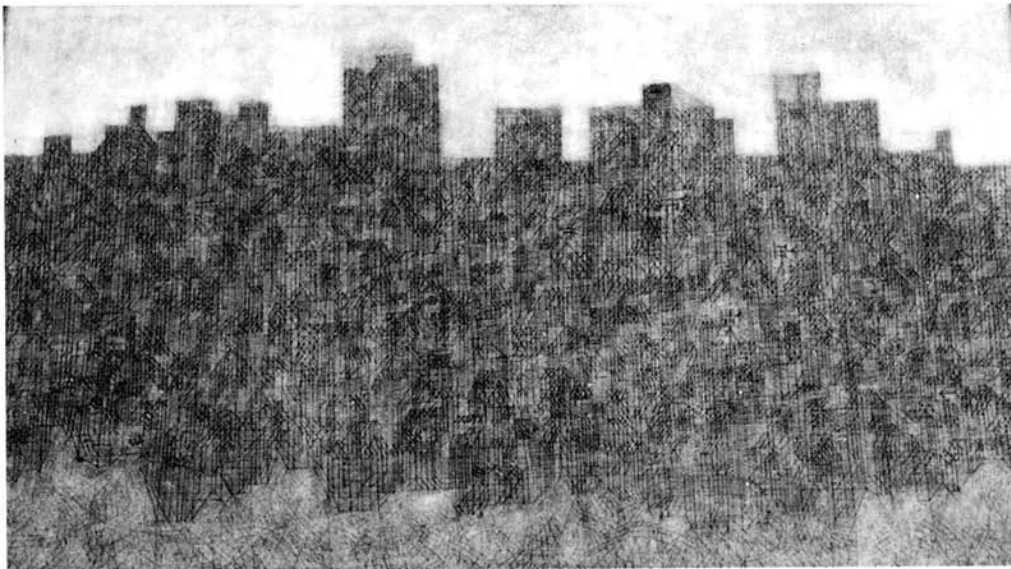




(above, video still)

RONALD ANADING
Line Drawing
1999
Film, VHS format
Collection of the artist





ARTURO LUZ

City

1959

Oil & pencil on canvas

85 x 152 cm

Gift of Fernando Zóbel

DAVID CORTEZ MEDALLA

The Joyous Kingdom

1956

Casein & sand on canvas

46 x 56 cm

Gift of Fernando Zóbel

